DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 406 688 CS 215 820

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TITLE Language and the New Capitalism.
PUB DATE Mar 97
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, March 24-28, 1997).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Business; *Capitalism; *Education Work Relationship; Educational Change; Educational Philosophy; Foreign Countries; Futures (of Society); *Language Role; *Literacy
IDENTIFIERS Australia; Discourse Aims; *Educational Issues; National Priorities; World Views

ABSTRACT

The "new capitalism" is unfolding in the context of a "powerful, intrusive, highly regulatory techno-rationalist business world view," which, as manifested in education reform as well as in wider changes at the level of the state, has impacted powerfully on language processes and practices. This world view, embraced by many governments, is now inscribed on how literacy is conceived and taught within publicly funded and maintained educational institutions. Current educational reform discourse is reflected at the level of language learning in "lingering basics," the "new basics," "elite literacies," and "foreign language literacy." All these terms are grounded in ways of responding to the global economy. A clear functional symmetry exists between these broad literacy types and trends within the "new work order." The nearer that literacy approaches the world beyond school, the more functional and instrumental critique becomes, with emphasis on finding new and better ways of meeting institutional targets but where these targets are themselves beyond question. Self-direction and empowerment often amount to little more than the right of workers to discharge accountability for finding the most efficient and effective ways of meeting goals and performance levels, laid down by the real decision-makers. Educators committed to understanding language and social processes need to participate actively in public debate about classroom-based language/literacy education and the world beyond the classroom. (Contains 18 references.) (NKA)

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Language and the New Capitalism

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Some comments on "capital" and "capitalism"

To appreciate what, if anything is "new" about the new capitalism, and to get angles on the significance of the relationship between language and the new capitalism, it is helpful to begin with some general comments about capitalism *per se*.

In broad terms, capitalism may be understood as a system which uses wage labour to produce commodities for sale, exchange, and for generating profit, rather than for the meeting the immediate needs of the producers. As such, the distinction between use value (X's value comes from using it) and exchange value (its value is for exchange and what we can get for it) is fundamental.

Capital is seen as one of four main production factors, the others being land, labour, and enterprise. Capital consists of such things as machinery, infrastructure/plant, tools and technologies, other human creations (from ideas to exchange media like money, synthetics, etc.) that are applied to the production process.

Capital is used to purchase commodities - raw materials and labour, mainly - in order to produce commodities for sale at a profit; which profit is turned back into capital: the process of capital accumulation.

This very general notion of capitalism can accommodate many different specific forms of activity, as well as many debates about what it's all about.

For Marx, the emphasis was on labour as the engine of value creation. i.e., it was adding labour to the other productive forces that was the key: by generating surplus value from the worker's labour, the capitalist could accumulate. But this presupposed exploitation of the worker, and class conflict was thereby structured into capitalism as a massive contradiction.

Weber, by contrast, focused on markets and various institutions which enable market exchange as the key to capitalism - such institutions as private property, market networks, monetary systems, and appropriate "socialising mechanisms" to shape up attitudes conducive to accumulation.

Historically, a range of forms on a range of scales have been evident.

- agrarian
- industrial
- financial
- post-industrial/informationist
- small scale/private
- entrepreneurial
- corporate/monopoly
- transnational

(Marshall ed. 1994: 38-40)

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While some of these variations in type and scope have been around for a very long time - who was the first farmer to grow corn for sale at a profit?; who were the early entrepreneurs who drove a system(at)ic wedge between owners of capital and wage labourers? - they are all still around today. They are all part of the larger "scene" of capitalism, so to speak.

A brief account of key features of the "new" capitalism

So, what is "new" in the new capitalism? What features is "new" credited with drawing out? Much has been written on this theme, many accounts dealing with specific aspects, while others attempt to gain a larger overview. The most satisfactory succinct synthesis I have found to date on themes discussed at length in the literature is provided by Manuel Castells (1993). Castells identifies five systematically related features of what may be called the new capitalism: features which have been emerging and aligning during the last half century.

1. Sources of productivity depend increasingly on the application of science and technology and the quality of information and management in the production process: applied knowledge and information. "The greater the complexity and productivity of an economy, the greater its informational component and the greater the role played by new knowledge (as compared with the mere addition of such production factors as capital or labor) in the growth of productivity" (ibid: 16-17). Producers are forced to build their activities around "higher value-added production", which depends on increased use of high technology and abstract thinking - or what Reich (1992) refers to as the work of symbolic analysts. Major innovations during the past thirty years, which have underwritten new spheres of production and vastly enhanced productivity, are all the results of "applying theoretical knowledge to the processes of innovation and diffusion" (Levett and Lankshear 1994: 31).

2. An increasing proportion of GNP is shifting from material production to information-processing activities. The same holds for the working: whether "foot soldiers of the information economy ... stationed in 'back offices' at computer terminals linked to world wide information banks" (Reich 1992:175), or as 'symbolic analysts' involved in the high order 'problem solving, problem identifying and strategic brokering activities' performed by research scientists, design and software engineers, management consultants, writers and editors, architects and architectural consultants, marketing strategists, and many others besides (c.f., Reich 1992: 175). "An ever-growing role is played by the manipulation of symbols in the organization of production and in the enhancement of productivity" (Castells 1993: 17).

3. Major changes in the *organization* of production has occurred along two axes. First, goods production has shifted from standardised mass production to *flexible specialisation* and increased *innovation* and *adaptability*. This allows for optimal customisation and diversification of products, and enables quick shifts to be made between different product lines - reflect the postmodern predilection for "difference" (that makes no difference) and diversity; plus the so-called flat hierarchies. Second, a change has occurred in the *social relationships* of work. The "vertically integrated large-scale organisations" of 'old' standardised mass production capitalism have given way to "vertical disintegration and horizontal networks between economic units" (ibid:

18). This is partly a matter of flatter and increased devolution of responsibility to individual employees, and the creation of quality circles, multi-skilled work teams with interchangeable tasks, and enlarged scope for workers to participate in decision-making (within definite parameters). It is also a matter of horizontal relationships of co-operation, consultation, co-ordination, in the interests of flexibility, decentralisation, and adaptability in production, which extend beyond the confines of a specific business or firm to include other `partners' within an integrated productive enterprise: such as collaborative arrangements between manufacturers and suppliers which help keep overheads and stock inventories down, allowing competitive pricing which can undercut opponents.

4. "Real time globalism". National economies no longer the unit of analysis or strategic frame of reference for companies and workers. It's about playing on the whole world stage. For many individual workers, their competition comes from all over the world. And, of course, many companies *are* "all over the world and all at once". Robert Reich says with respect to individual American workers that their prospects are now indexical to the global market. Individual American workers whose contributions to the global economy are more highly valued in world markets will succeed, while others, whose contributions are deemed far less valuable, fail" (Reich 1992: 172).

5. The context of this change - which reflexively spearheads and responds to it - is the information technologies revolution. The new capitalism is dynamically and inseparably linked to the current technological revolution - especially with the information-communications dimension of this revolution. In addition to informatics, microelectronics and telecommunications, this encompasses also scientific discoveries and applications in biotechnology, new materials, lasers, renewable energy, and the like (Castells 1993: 19). The dynamism of the relationship is such that demands generated by the kinds of economic and organisational changes already identified stimulate ongoing developments in information and communications technologies. These technologies (in their earlier manifestations), however, themselves provided many of the material conditions needed for the emergence of the global economy in the first place. Set in train, as they are, the dynamics continue apace, creating a situation where a crucial factor - if not the fundamental source - of wealth generation resides in the "ability to create new knowledge and apply it to every realm of human activity by means of enhanced technological and organizational procedures of information processing" (ibid: 20).

To these features identified by Castells, I would add that the new capitalism is unfolding in the context of a powerful, intrusive, highly regulatory "techno-rationalist business world view", which - as manifested in education reform as well as in wider changes at the level of the state - has impacted powerfully on language processes and practices.

This world view is an assemblage of values, purposes, beliefs, and ways of doing things that originated in the world of business. It has now been embraced by many governments as the appropriate modus operandi for public sector institutions, including those of compulsory and post-compulsory education and training. The logic of this world view is now powerfully inscribed on

how literacy is conceived and taught within publicly funded and maintained educational institutions.

The concept of a techno-rationalist business world view is an amalgam of several ideas.

The "techno" component refers to privileging technicist approaches to realising social purposes. It captures what critical social theorists call the triumph of technocratic or instrumental rationality within the everyday conduct of human affairs (Aronowitz and Giroux 1993). This is the idea of reducing human goals and values to constructs which can be broken down into material tasks, steps, categories, processes, etc., and tackled in systematic ways using appropriate tools, and techniques applied in a means to ends fashion. It includes such procedures as operationalising qualities (e.g., competence) into measurable and observable behavioural objectives and outcomes; defining values in terms of commodities which can be produced technologically; framing goals in terms of programs, packages, and recipes which can be delivered as means to attainment; and the like.

In the sense intended here, "rationalist" refers to the currently pervasive tendency to analyse and measure institutional processes and provisions in cost-benefits terms, with a view to "rationalising" them accordingly. This involves quantifying, measuring, and comparing different options for producing particular outcomes, benefits, and performances, and exercising (rational) preferences in the light of the costs or inputs incurred in producing various levels of result. Having performed the calculation, the individual or organisation exercises preference in the manner of profit or benefit maximiser.

"Business" refers to a gamut of values and characteristics associated with the preferred institutional style of (so called) leading-edge profit-driven organisations. These include such ideas and qualities as being "cost effective", "lean and mean", "quality-controlled", "quality-assuring", "focused on the bottom line", "value-adding", "competitive-edged", "efficient", "rationalised", and committed to "uniform standards across all sites of activity". Organisations of this type value "transferability" (of knowledge, skills, expertise), emphasise "accountability", privilege "competence" over time on the job, and insist on "audit trails" as means of verifying "performance". They are oriented toward quantifiable outcomes, subscribe to a "portfolio and project" approach to life, and generally prefer individual enterprise agreements to collective awards and bargaining procedures at the point of hiring.

New capitalism and language: some macro social processes

1. <u>A new word order?: functional symmetry of literacies with new conditions and types of work</u>

Features of the new capitalism sketched here have impacted on current educational reform discourse. At the level of language learning, this is reflected in an emphasis on four broad "types" of literacy. I call these the "lingering basics", the "new basics", "elite literacies", and "foreign language literacy". An overarching emphasis on standard English literacy is presupposed in the first three types.

At the school level, "lingering basics" refers to mastery of generalisable techniques and concepts of decoding and encoding print, presumed to be building blocks for subsequent education in subject content and "higher order skills". At the adult level they refer to functional capacities with everyday texts enabling citizens to meet basic print needs for being incorporated into the economic and civic "mainstream". These conceptions "linger" from an earlier period.

The "new basics" reflect recognition that major shifts have occurred in social practices with the transitions from: an agro-industrial economy to a post-industrial information/services economy; "Fordism" to "post-Fordism"; personal face-to-face communities to impersonal metropolitan and "virtual" communities; a paternal (welfare) state to a more devolved state requiring greater self-sufficiency. These shifts are seen to demand on the part of all individuals qualitatively more sophisticated ("smart"), abstract, symbolic-logical capacities than were needed in the past. Hence, "the percentage of all students who demonstrate ability to reason, solve problems, apply knowledge, and write and communicate effectively will increase substantially (U.S. Congress 1994, Goal 3 B (ii)).

"Elite literacies" refer to higher order scientific, technological, and symbolic practices grounded in excellence in academic learning. Here "literacy" denotes advanced understanding of the logics and processes of inquiry within disciplinary fields, together with command of state of the art work in these fields. This allegedly permits high level critique, innovation, diversification, refinement, etc., through application of theory and research. The focus here is "knowledge work" (Drucker 1993), construed as the real "value-adding" work within modern economies (Reich 1992).

"Foreign language literacy" is seen ultimately in terms of proficiency with visual and spoken texts integral to global dealings within the new economic and strategic world order, thereby serving "the Nation's needs in commerce, diplomacy, defense, and education" (NCEE 1983: 26) - genuflections toward more "humanist" rationales notwithstanding. This calls, minimally, for communicative competence allowing functional cross-cultural access to a range of discursive practices and, optimally, for levels of fluency and cultural awareness equal to being persuasive, diplomatic, and strategically effective within sensitive high risk/high gain contexts.

A clear functional symmetry exists between these broad literacy types and trends within "the new work order" (Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1996). Increasingly, work is becoming polarised between providing "symbolic analytic services" at one extreme, and "routine production" and "in-person" services at the other (Reich 1992). At the same time, modern enterprises seek to infuse a sense of responsibility for the success of the enterprise throughout the entire organisation, and to push decision-making, problem-solving, and productive innovation as far down toward "front line" workers as possible.

Symbolic analytic work is seen as "substantial value-adding" work (ibid: 177) and is well paid. It provides services delivering data, words, visual and non-visual representations. This is the work of research scientists, all manner of engineers (from civil to sound), management consultants, investment bankers, systems analysts, authors, editors, art directors, video and film producers, and the like. It involves high level problem-identifying, problem-solving, and strategic brokering activities (ibid).

Routine production and in-person service work, by comparison, are construed as "low value-adding", and are poorly paid. Beyond demands for basic numeracy and the ability to read, "routine" work often calls primarily for reliability, loyalty, and the capacity to take direction, and, in the case of in-person service workers, "a pleasant demeanour" (ibid). The gulf between this and symbolic analytic work marks the difference between "elite literacies" and the "lingering basics".

Between these extremes, work is impacted by the "changed rules of manufacturing and competition" (Wiggenhorn 1990), whereby frontline workers must increasingly solve problems as they arise, operate self-directed work teams, understand and apply concepts and procedures of quality assurance and control, and assume responsibility for many tasks previously performed by lower level management. Such work is agreed to require a "higher level basics' than previously. Yet, this work also is often not well paid. To this extent, both the "lingering basics" and the "new basics" sanction systematic exploitation in the workforce. Indeed, we may speak of a new word order contiguous with the new work order instrumentally and constitutively entwined with it.

2. The gross instrumentalization of literacy: economized language

A brazen instrumentalism is never far from the surface in the policy pronouncements and supportive rhetoric of educational reform pertaining to literacy. The emphasis and value attached to these elite literacies is most explicitly in virtue of the fact that high impact innovation comes from the application of theoretical knowledge. Whereas the new industries of the last century, such as "electricity, steel, the telephone and automobile ... were invented by 'talented tinkerers' (Bell 1974) rather than through applications of scientific theory", the big impact inventions of this century, like the computer, jet aircraft, laser surgery, the birth control pill, the social survey ... and their many derivations and application, come from theory-driven scientific laboratories. Symbolic analysts manipulate, modify, refine, combine, and in other ways employ symbols contained in or derived from the language and literature of their disciplines to produce new knowledge, innovative designs, new applications of theory, and so on. These can be drawn on to "add maximum value" to raw materials and labour in the process of producing goods and services. Increasingly, the critical dimension of knowledge work is valued mainly, if not solely, in terms of value-adding economic potential. It is critical analysis and critical judgment directed toward innovation and improvement *within* the parameters of a field or enterprise, rather than criticism in larger terms which might hold the field and its applications and effects, or an enterprise and its goals, up to scrutiny.

Much the same is true of foreign language and literacy proficiency. Justifications for increased emphasis on foreign language proficiency advanced in policy documents and supporting texts often foreground "humanist" considerations in support of foreign language proficiency and bilingualism: whether by increasing foreign language enrolments, or by maintaining community languages and ensuring ESL proficiency among linguistic minority groups. Sooner or later, however, economic motives generally emerge as the "real" reasons behind efforts to promote foreign language proficiency. *Australia's Language* gives as its first reason the fact that it enriches our community intellectually, educationally and culturally; and second, that it contributes to economic, diplomatic, strategic, scientific and technological development (DEET 1991: 14-15). However, Australia's location in the Asia-Pacific region and its patterns of overseas trade are the

only relevant factor explicitly mentioned with respect to developing a strategy which "[strikes] a balance between the diversity of languages which could be taught and the limits of resources that are available (ibid: 15).

Elsewhere, influential statements are direct and unambiguous: for example, US Senator Paul Simon's reference to tongue-tied Americans trying to do business across the globe, in a world where there are 10,000 leading Japanese business persons speaking English to less than 1,000 Americans, and where "you can buy in any language, but sell only in the customer's" (Kearns and Doyle 1991: 87).

Two main factors have generated the emergence of second language literacy education as a new (and pressing) capitalist instrumentality. First, trading partners have changed greatly for Anglophone economies, and many of our new partners have not been exposed to decades (or centuries) of colonial or neo-colonial English language hegemony. Second, trade competition has become intense. Many countries now produce commodities previously produced by relatively few. Within this context of intensified competition, the capacity to market, sell, inform, and provide after sales support in the customer's language becomes a crucial element of competitive edge.

3. Individualization and commodification of language and literacy

In the grip of the techno-rationalist business world view, literacy performance is measured and reported *ad nauseam* and compiled into personal *portfolios*. At a time when individuals must be prepared to move around to find employment, "portable certified literacy competence" assumes functional significance.

This is a facet of "possessive individualism", a key operating principle of current reform discourse, and grounded in a liberal conception of people and society, according to which: "society is composed of free, equal individuals who are related to each other as proprietors of their own capabilities. Their successes and acquisitions are the products of their own initiatives, and it is the role of institutions to foster and support their personal development" - not least because national revitalization - economic, cultural, and civic - will "result from the good works of individuals" (Popkewitz 1991: 150).

At the same time, literacy is profoundly commodified within the current reform agenda, in relation to assessment, and evaluation packages, validation packages, remedial teaching packages, packaged standards, profiles, and curriculum guidelines, textbook packages, and teacher professional development packages promising recipes and resources for securing the required performance outcomes. Sometimes this commodification reaches bizarre levels, as in a model promulgated recently in Australia (NBEET 1996), where it is proposed that industry sectors build literacy competencies into their respective "competency standards". The idea behind local competency standards, and associated competency-based training, is to make Australian industry as competitive as possible by creating a "smart" workforce of high quality and efficient performers by means of up to date training programs that prepare workers cost effectively for the kinds of tasks they will be doing on the job. Competency standards comprise so many "units of competence": e.g., "participates in daily team meetings and discussions". These are broken down into "elements of competence". For instance, "participates in daily team meetings and

discussions", contains as one *element* of competence "reads team meeting documents". An element of competence has associated "performance criteria", as well as a specified "range of variables", which plots various dimensions along which performance will have to be demonstrated (such as in a range of contexts, or with reference to a range of materials or tasks, in which performance of, say, "initiating discussions" might occur). Finally, an "evidence guide" for assessing competent performance has been produced for each unit of competence.

The proposed model provides a "painting by numbers" guide as to how literacy competencies can be framed and incorporated within a set of industry standards. Options include: adding literacy *units* of competence to the industry standards; adding literacy *elements* of competence to existing units of competence; including literacy aspects within the *performance criteria* and/or in *range of variables* statements; including literacy in the *evidence guide* for units of competence. Following extensive "analysis of the workplace", these various options can be exercised - drawing on the information gathered to determine the best combinations of options to meet the literacy performance requirements of work at the different competency levels. Once this is done, vocational education and training programs can provide courses, modules, materials and resources for teaching and assessing literacy as a component of competency-based training initiatives.

4. The domestication of language as critical practice

While educational reform discourse emphasises critical forms of literate practice, couched in terms of a "critical thinking" component of effective literacy, or as text-mediated acts of problem solving, it is important to recognise the nature and limits of the critical literacies proposed. They are typically practices which permit subjecting *means* to critique, but take *ends* as given. References to critical literacy, critical analysis, critical thinking, problem solving, and the like, have, "in the current climate ... a mixture of references to functional or useful knowledge that relates to demands of the economy and labor formation, as well as more general claims about social inquiry and innovation" (Popkewitz 1991: 128). The nearer that literacy approaches the world beyond school, the more functional and instrumental critique becomes, with emphasis on finding new and better ways of meeting institutional targets (of quality, productivity, innovation, improvement), but where these targets are themselves beyond question. The logic here parallels that described by Delgado-Gaitan (1990: 2) as operating in notions of empowerment construed as "the act of showing people how to work within a system from the perspective of people in power". The fact that standards are specified so tightly and rigidly within the current reform agenda reveals that the ends driving these standards are to be taken as beyond critique.

5. A new "doublespeak"?

In The New Work Order (1996), Jim Gee, Glynda Hull and I look at some of the language behind the new capitalism. A new genre of "fast capitalist texts" heralds the new capitalism, and its new work order and revamped workplaces, using language in ways very often not borne out on the ground. These texts are replete with talk of "enchanted workplaces", "self-directed work teams", "empowered workers", and other equally positive and attractive terms. Empirical investigation, however, regularly betrays a less expansive reality. Self-direction and empowerment often amount to little more than the right of workers to discharge accountability for finding (the most) efficient and effective ways of meeting goals, performance levels, quality schedules, etc., laid down by the real decision-makers within so-called flat hierarchies. Workers are "empowered" to

accept and enact such liberatory notions as that of "the working week", defined as "however long it takes to get the job done". Glynda Hull's graphic accounts of migrant workers in a Silicon Valley electronics company falling behind their schedules working to faulty specifications the work team did not believe they were at liberty to challenge or overrule - despite knowing the specifications were wrong and despite having recently been through a workplace education program intended to enhance "self-directed teamness" - is a clear case of language that has as much relationship to the particular workplace reality as the notion of educational "reform" has to empirical learning conditions under current policies.

6. The clamour to technologise literacy

Escalating dependence of work and other daily tasks and processes on computer-mediated texts is associated with prominent references to technological literacy and technologised curricula in educational reform pronouncements. Indeed, according to Aronowitz and Giroux (1993: 63), "the whole task set by contemporary education policy is to keep up with rapidly shifting developments in technology". A National Science Board publication, *Educating Americans for the 21st Century* (1983; see Toch 1991: 16), claimed that "alarming numbers of young Americans are ill-equipped to work in, contribute to, profit from, and enjoy our increasingly technological society". The "Technology Literacy Challenge" package of February 1996 voted US$2 billion over five years to mobilize "the private sector, schools, teachers, parents, students, community groups, state and local governments, and the federal government" to meet the goal of making all US children "technologically literate" by "the dawn of the 21st century". The strategy aims to ensure all teachers receive the necessary training and support "to help students learn via computers and the information superhighway"; to develop "effective and engaging software and on-line learning resources" as integral elements of school curricula; to provide all teachers and students with access to modern computers; and to connect every US classroom to the Internet (Winters, 15 February 1996).

Promoting technological literacies in tune with labour market needs is only part of the story. New electronic technologies directly and indirectly comprise key *products* of new capitalist economies. As "direct products", they consist in all manner of hardware and software, for which worldwide markets need to be generated and sustained. As "indirect products", new technologies consist in information and communications services, such as Internet access provision, on-line ordering and purchasing facilities, manuals and guides, networking and repair services, web page design, and so on. Educational reform agendas serve crucially here as a means to creating and maintaining enlarged markets for products of the information economy - extending beyond curricular exhortations to advocate also the extensive use of new technologies within administrative tasks of restructured schools (Kearns and Doyle 1991).

Ending

Apologists for the new capitalism, like apologists for the magical educational powers of new technologies, are currently surfing the tide of history with seemingly unbounded confidence. They have assumed the right to define the role and purposes of education in terms of service to the unfolding new work order. Their confidence is backed with the power of educational policies decreed, enforced, and policed by administrators high on the waft of the techno-rationalist business world view. The choice facing educators who are committed to alternative educational

visions is clear cut. We either "put up and shut up", or we struggle to live our the faith that education is not the servant of any single end or purpose.

> In the new capitalism words are taking on new meaning, language and communication are being recruited for new ends ... and multiple literacies are being distributed in new ways ... [This new capitalism] makes us confront directly, at a fundamental level, the issue of goals and ends, of culture and core values, of the nature of language, learning and literacy in and out of schools. (Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1996: 158).

My aim has been to provide some focus for discussion about desirable and defensible relationships between classroom-based language and literacy education and the world beyond the classroom. This is not (yet) a closed issue. But if educators like ourselves, who are committed to understanding language and social processes, do not participate actively in public debate about this issue, it will rapidly become much more closed than the interests of a healthy, moral, educative society can afford.

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